

# UPDATE:

## Newsletter Of The African Burial Ground & Five Points Archaeological Projects

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## HISTORIC SITE OFFERS NEW DIRECTIONS

by Emilyn Brown

Coinciding with the maturity and abundance of the fall season, efforts to reclaim New York's African Burial Ground have finally come to fruition, reflecting a 'harvest' of community activism, congressional intervention and most recently, national historic landmark status within a city designated historic district. The latest gain for the burial site, to date the oldest and most densely populated cemetery found within an urban setting, is a government contract authorizing transfer of the remains of nearly 400 men, women and children from City University's Lehman College to Howard University in Washington, D.C. Fully equipped for in-depth laboratory analysis, the prestigious African-American university will take full rein of the project within 45 days; a move expected to revision history through educational opportunities, scientific research and cultural recognition of one of New York's oldest communities.

Education is one of the ways in which Howard University plans to address the issue of ongoing involvement by New Yorkers. "Although still in negotiation," Dr. Blakey offered, "we are considering exchange programs where New York students might come to Howard for a semester or a year, paying school fees at their institution or ours, to participate in this special anthropological study." Four New York students have already been chosen to participate in the initial research phase of the project.

Once the project is fully underway, attempts to reconstruct the lives of colonial-era Africans will become the responsibility of an international team of scientists. "We'll have a sense of their nutritional problems. We may gain a sense of the kind of illnesses they experienced, which relate to things like housing, employment and available food and health care, or the lack thereof. We will know the ratio of men to women, the life expectancy, fertility and so forth." Over the next four years, comprehensive research, including DNA testing, should aid in pinpointing the countries of origin for those buried at the site. An additional two years will be needed for analysis and interpretation.

The high point of the transfer entails a cultural celebration, coordinated by Howard University, which the public is urged to attend. The event, tentatively entitled "A Ceremony of Bones," is scheduled to take

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## Federal Steering Committee Recommendations To Congress

Contributed by Peggy King Jorde, Executive Director  
Federal Steering Committee

In October of 1992, the Federal Steering Committee for the African Burial Ground was chartered. The committee, comprised of historians, anthropologists, museum professionals, architects, attorneys, clergy, city, state and federal officials and interested community members, was created to represent the interests of the African community at large and to make formal recommendations to the General Services Administration (GSA) and Congress regarding the memorialization of the African Burial Ground. Over a period of approximately nine months the committee produced a recommendations report that was submitted to Congress and GSA on August 6, 1993.

The following excerpts from the committee's report best summarizes the focus of the recommendations and report:

### Federal Steering Committee Resolutions

On January 25, 1993 the Steering Committee approved seven resolutions to commemorate the African Burial Ground and the history of the African presence in New York City. These seven resolutions, currently revised to reflect the national historic landmark status, provided a guideline for developing recommendations for this report.

- I. That a world-class memorial Museum and Research Center of African American History and Culture be established within the National Historic Landmark African Burial Ground to interpret the historical and cultural development of Africans in colonial New York, in the context of New York, the United States and Western Hemisphere African-American History.
- II. That a memorial monument(s) be commissioned to commemorate the heritage of all Africans in America, particularly the estimated 20,000 Africans who were interred in the African Burial Ground. Said monument(s) should be installed within the national historic landmark African Burial Ground.
- III. That a signage program be developed to interpret the history and culture of the African peoples interred in the landmark African Burial Ground. Such signage should be installed throughout the area.

- IV. That the memorial art work and a memorial exhibit documenting and interpreting the 1991-92 excavation of the African Burial Ground be installed in the lobby of the Foley Square federal office tower national historic landmark African Burial Ground.
- V. That the approximately 400 remains excavated from the African Burial Ground be reinterred in the former Pavilion site of the Foley Square federal office tower. That a temporary memorial be installed to commemorate this site during the research phase of the African Burial Ground project and that a permanent memorial be installed there following reinterment.
- VI. That a sacred international memorial service be held in New York City at the time of reinterment.
- VII. That the current appropriation from the federal government be used to plan and implement the art work, memorial exhibit, memorial monuments and signage programs and to plan the memorial museum and international reinterment ceremony.

Following the adoption of the resolutions, seven subcommittees were established and defined by tasks, to determine the goals and to identify the strategies for implementation and the opportunities that would be used to develop focused recommendations for a fitting memorial.

\* \* \* \* \*

*In the wake of the destruction of a portion of a final resting place for thousands of Africans who helped build New York, there is now an opportunity to memorialize these men, women and children. The recommendations to Congress represent concrete approaches that will assist in reinforcing, reclaiming, and rediscovering a significant, but neglected history. It is important for the general public to realize, however, that any Federal Advisory Committee only has the power to make suggestions, and that if the federal government (through its arm, the GSA) chooses, it can ignore every one of these recommendations. It will take ongoing effort and attention on the part of concerned individuals and groups to insure that these recommendations are followed by the federal government.*

place in October when the last of the remains form part of the caravan that will journey from New York to Washington. The caravan will stop at such notable African American institutions as Abyssinian Baptist Church and the Schomburg Center in Harlem, Mother Bethel Church in Philadelphia, and the Metropolitan A.M.E. Church and the Museum of African Art in Washington. It is anticipated that this historic event, presently being coordinated by Howard University staff, will culminate in a mass commemoration at Crampton Auditorium on the Howard Campus where emphasis will be placed on African traditions and culture. Seeking to address the tragic obscurity associated with the burial population — a circumstance engendered by enslavement and deprivation — musical homage, prayer and tributes will be offered as part of a continuing legacy of struggle. *For additional information and details call OPEI at (212) 432-5707.*



- o A forum on the New York African Burial Ground sponsored by Congressman John Conyers will be held on Thursday, September 16, 1993 from 2:30 to 4:30 p.m., as part of Congressional Black Caucus Week. The location will be at the Washington Convention Center, 900 9th St. N.W., Washington, D.C.
- o African Burial Ground Educators' Conference to update teachers on the status and history of the African Burial Ground will be held Nov. 5th and 6th, 1993. Presentations and laboratory tours will be given by principal researchers: Dr. Michael Blakey, Dr. Sherrill Wilson, Dr. Rebecca Yamin, and other project staff. Admission is free, but advance registration is required. *For information on the Forum or Conference contact OPEI (212) 432-5707.*
- o "From Slavery to Freedom" — The Paintings of Ron Brown will be on exhibit through September 26, 1993 at the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture.
- o The 125th Anniversary Tribute to Dr. W.E.B. DuBois will be held at Carnegie Hall on October 4, 1993. Call the W.E.B. DuBois Tribute Committee for details (212) 354-6108.
- o Family History Fair, Sunday, October 10, 1993 12:00 noon to 5:00 p.m. at N.Y.U. Loeb Student Center, Washington Sq. So., at LaGuardia Place. Learn to trace your family history, preserve and interpret family documents and make use of archives and libraries in and around NY through exhibits and workshops. Bring family documents, letters, photographs, etc. for advice. Admission is free. For more information, call (212) 415-5547.

## TWELVE VOICES

*In August of 1993, contributing writer Rodger Taylor posed the following question to various members of the public, as well as employees of John Milner Associates: "What do you think about the human remains unearthed from the African Burial Ground being moved to Howard University in Washington, D.C.?" As the following mini-interviews indicate, responses varied.*

### Amal Muhammad-Historian/Activist

I'm not focused on the remains being moved to a particular place. What I'm concerned about is that they be placed in good hands, meaning people who possess the qualifications and expertise to conduct the type of research that will shed light on the history of Africans in colonial New York. Since it is a scholarly academic endeavor it requires people who not be molded by community opinions, but it is vitally important that they have the sensitivity to ask the appropriate questions in the course of the research that are important and relevant to the people of African descent.

Some members of the community have a sense of New York's possessiveness towards the remains. My feelings is that there is no rational basis for having the human remains stay here simply on that basis. However, I hope when the decision was made to remove the remains, all options of doing the work here were explored. I say that because I also know there is an issue of damaging the remains by moving them. There should be constant ongoing contact between New York and D.C. so that New York Africans will not be cut off from the flow of information. The role of the Liaison Office\* needs to be expanded to facilitate the transfer and flow of knowledge of information about the project.

### Mrs. Esther Dawson, Concerned Citizen

The reason for the remains going there is because that's where the scientists are. I have no objections about them going to Howard because these are black scientists — what could be better than to have our own people study them. I think it's important that they share the information with us. It's also crucial that we have some type of recognition for the people in the African Burial ground — a memorial and museum. And after the scientific work is done, bring them back where they belong. They need to be reburied in that cemetery.

It would also be interesting after the findings are made if the scientists would write and tell us if they got any spiritual feelings from working with them. Our people are very spiritual, but we don't tap on our spirituality as much as we did in the past.

### Claudia Milne - Lab Tech. Foley Square Laboratory

As a graduate student in the New York City College system, I think it's a loss for New York City and New York City

students, but if it's been determined by the community that the people at Howard University are the best to do the job, so be it. I hope it goes well. It seems like there is a possibility that more damage will be done to the remains by transporting them.

There are a couple of things regarding moving the non-burial Broadway Block artifacts that concern me. I don't have anything against Warren Barbour [an archaeologist and professor in the SUNY system who is coming down to Howard to lead that aspect of the project] but it's a big loss for New York City students and archaeologists. The Broadway Block contains information about the earliest potters in New York City — Crolus and Remy. It's information we've been looking for a long time. It's a big boon for Washington, D.C., but the stuff wasn't found in Washington, D.C. I'm going to miss the opportunity of working on this material.

Howard doesn't have a graduate department. Graduate students usually write the papers that inform the greater community about the project. Are they going to build an archaeological department based on this project? If they are, that's a great thing. I'm curious about it. You can't predict that kind of stuff. But I don't understand the reasoning behind sending the artifacts away. We've got the crew and the facility to do the work right here.

**Chris Moore, Steering Committee Member, Historian**

I don't think where the remains go is as important as making sure a qualified African American is head of the project. At the moment that person is Dr. Michael Blakey. If an arrangement could be made locally to ensure that leadership then I would have no objections to keeping the remains in New York.

**Peggy King Jorde, Exec. Direction, Federal Steering Committee**

I don't see a major problem as long as folks here have access to it. A major educational liaison should be established. I don't know how they'd do it, but there should be major exchange programs. I know the concerns of people here — it's a New York resource. [But,] I like the idea of it heightening the visibility of a black institution. Nobody gets threatened if a project goes to Harvard or Yale.

**Reverend Erroll Harvey, Pastor at St. Augustine's Episcopal Church, Manhattan.**

I'm a little disturbed by it. I understand the idea of bring acclaim to a black institution, but its in Washington, D.C. and not here. I believe here they were buried and here they should remain. I believe the idea of memorializing them is critically important. I support a museum, a world class memorial in the building and I like the idea of building and recreating a slave ship at the South Street Seaport.

**Doville Nelson, Lab Tech., Foley Square Lab and Candidate for Student Intern Program, Howard Univ.**

I have a vested interest in this. My first thought is that it's somewhat unfair to New York City students. My second thought is would those who would be doing the work in New York (MFAT) be competent and sensitive enough to do an effective job? I don't think so, whereas black people see those remains from the African Burial Ground as a life issue and part of the continuum of our experience. Historically, Europeans tend to see our remains as a data pool to be objectified and in that way minimized.

If you look at the skeletal work that's presently being done, the majority of the skeletons come from India or other places in the "Third World." "Good science" doesn't seem to be practiced by Europeans on their own remains. There are laws and restrictions placed on skeletons here, and there is a level of respect that they are given. I think that at Howard, because it is a University of oppressed people, there's going to be a difference in how the history will be rewritten, shared and disseminated. For me that's the bottom line.

**Baba Keno Anderson, Yoruba Priest**

It doesn't matter. We freed them by giving them what they needed [in ceremonies last summer]. Their spirits are with the almighty and no longer trapped in that place or on this earth. If people want to spend our money to find out that they're black, how old they are, it doesn't matter. They can't harm them.

**Florence Taylor, Concerned Citizen**

It would be good. I believe they'd probably get a different treatment being at Howard University. Blacks would be more interested in the history. It would have a higher priority.

**Joyce Jenkins Jones, Community Activist**

I would have hoped that they stayed in New York but if they have to leave New York then they should go to Howard for proper scientific analysis. Our community might have missed the mark when we didn't press for Dr. Blakey to have a New York laboratory as well.

**Miriam Francis, Steering Committee Member Community Activist, Artist**

I fully respect Dr. Blakey and I was one of those who wanted the remains to go to Howard, so I'm satisfied that they are. My understanding is that one of the things that Dr. Blakey and his colleagues will do is tell us what part of Africa our ancestors come from. Learning that would be satisfying for me.

*\*Note: as of August 12, 1993, the Liaison Office of the African Burial Ground and Five Points Archaeological Project has been renamed The Office of Public Education & Interpretation of the African Burial Ground.*



## THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF FIVE POINTS

by Jesse Ponz

Most descriptions of the neighborhood considered New York's worst slum in the 19th century — the Five Points — paint a picture of rampant vice and violence amid poverty and squalor. By all accounts, the neighborhood was run-down, overcrowded and wracked with alcoholism and gang violence. Then as now, the lurid details of poverty and crime fired the public imagination, and then, as now, the majority of the poor were hard working, underpaid, and inadequately housed. The recent excavations within the historic Five Points neighborhood (which took place from June 1991 to January 1992), promise to illuminate some aspects of the daily lives of the city's working poor, as well as provide a material record of the transformation of New York from its Native American beginnings to the present.

The project area, known as the "Courthouse Block" (after the federal project currently underway on the site), consisted of portions of Blocks 160 and 161, located at Cardinal Hayes Place between Pearl and Worth Streets behind the present New York County Courthouse. Fourteen lots or parts of lots were excavated in all, yielding the remains of buildings, privies and cisterns, along with an array of artifacts reflecting daily life from the late 18th century to the present.

During the colonial period (1624-1776) and earlier, the area later known as Five Points bordered the southeast shore of a 48-acre pond — the Collect — bounded by present-day Pearl, Baxter, Lafayette, and Canal Streets. A stream connecting the Collect Pond to the East River followed present-day Pearl Street. The earliest evidence of human occupation on the Court house block was a concentration of oyster and clam shells, reflecting the food-gathering activities of Native Americans. According to the early settlers, an Indian Village was situated just west of the pond, somewhere in the vicinity of present-day City Hall Park and the African Burial Ground.

After the possession of Native American peoples, the area was probably used as farmland up until the 1730s and 1740s, when several industries began to expand around the Collect Pond. By 1755, tanneries (where animal hides were processed) were located in the project area along present-day Pearl Street making Blocks 160 and 161 among the earliest in the area to be developed. Fragments of leather and bark (an ingredient of the tanning process), recovered during the excavation, are thought to reflect this early industrial use of the area.

By the end of the 18th century, with land values soaring, the city was expanding at a rapid rate north of Chambers Street. Houses and small commercial establishments sprang up on Blocks 160 and 161 replacing the industry. The earliest structures found on the site including the remains of what may be the only bakery excavated in the U.S., date to this period. Though little is known about the ethnic composition of the neighborhood, the African-American presence is also thought to date from this period. Over on Cross (now Park) St. (outside the project area),

the Mother A.M.E. Zion Church, the first African Church in the city, was founded in 1796.

By the early 19th century, the neighborhood of the Sixth Ward (roughly bounded by present-day Broadway, Canal, the Bowery, and park Row) already housed many of the city's working poor. The residents, about a quarter of whom were either African Americans or European immigrants, had the lowest per capita income in the city, \$178 compared to the city's average of \$320. The Collect Pond, which had become polluted as a result of industrial dumping, was filled in and paved over. When Anthony (now Worth) Street was extended across the former pond, its intersection with Orange (now Baxter), and Cross (now Park) created the five points for which the neighborhood was named. Pearl Street (in the project area) had a granary, bake and grocery shops, a fruit store, a fish shop, a book shop, and a stable. On Orange (now Baxter) Street, many of the lots had residential buildings in the front and rear, indicating that even at this early date living space was becoming scarcer.

Around 1820, the houses built over the Collect Pond and adjacent wetlands began to sink into the moist soil, making the area's housing among the least desirable in the city. Though there was some movement out of the neighborhood, poor workers remained and immigrants continued to move in. Within five years, African-Americans began moving out into adjacent neighborhoods. From 14.2% of the population in 1825, the proportion of African Americans in the neighborhood had declined to 4% by 1855.

By the 1830s, as downtown New York continued to commercialize, Blocks 160 and 161 became even more crowded. Single family houses were subdivided into three and four apartments, large tenement houses (forerunners of apartment buildings) were constructed, and cellars were converted into low-quality housing. In 1832 (and again in 1849), a devastating cholera epidemic broke out in the neighborhood - no doubt aided in its spread by the overcrowded conditions and lack of adequate sanitation. The decade also saw the rise of some of the city's most notorious gangs, including the Plug Uglies, the Shirt Tails and the Forty Thieves, who reputedly got their start in the Five Points neighborhood.

In the 1840s, as thousands of Irish people emigrated to America, seeking relief from the poverty engendered by the potato famines in Ireland, many found housing in Five Points. By 1855, nearly three quarters of the city's immigrants lived in the Sixth Ward, including about 4,000 Irish, 5,200 Germans, 1,200 English and Scotch, 1,000 Italians and Polish, and 1,500 persons of other

nationalities. Though most were laborers, artisans, peddlers, and small shopkeepers, wages were often poverty-level and city services woefully absent. Thus, efforts to eradicate the social ills prevailing in Five Points sprang from religious organizations, who most often brought a moralistic tenor to their charitable work. Idleness and a propensity toward vice were considered the main causes of poverty.

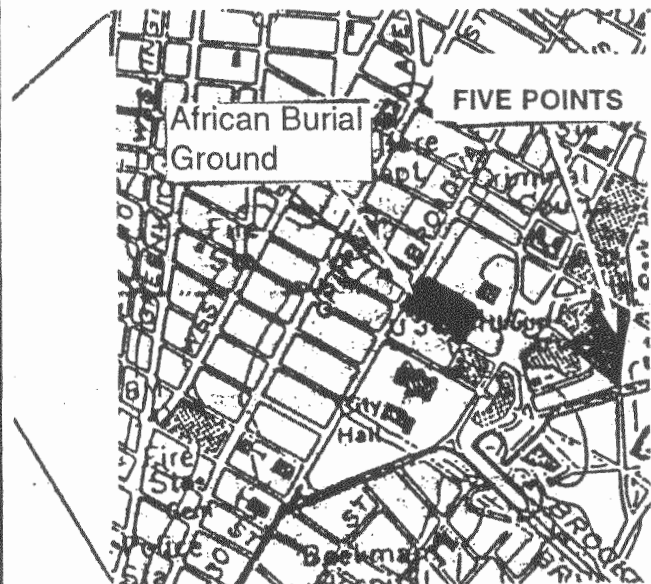
By the 1870s, brick houses and tenements began to replace the wooden structures that had been common in the Five Points area. Within 10 years, the ethnic composition of the Sixth ward had also changed with the arrival of hundreds of thousands of Italians into New York. On Blocks 160 and 161, about half of the residents were of Italian descent, and about 40% were Irish. By the 1890s, even larger buildings were built on Blocks 160 and 161, some of which contained 30 apartments. By then, the writings of the great reformer Jacob Riis were reaching a mass audience. Riis rightly pointed to the root causes of poverty in the shameful wages, inadequate public facilities, and exorbitant rents suffered by the city's workers. By the early 20th century most of the neighborhood was demolished, making way for

government buildings, including the New York County Courthouse, and Columbus Park.

The story of Five Points is really about the transformation of urban America, in particular how New York expanded, engulfing its rural hinterland to meet the demands of industry and commerce. As the work place changed from the small shop owned and operated by craftsmen and apprentices to the factory employing large numbers of men, women and children, so too did the ability of the common person to exercise control over his or her fate. Property and commerce were in the hands of a few and the majority was left to fend for itself. And it is this majority of whom we know so little — their home life and family organization, what they ate, how they spent their leisure time, how they adapted to American culture if they were immigrants, and how everybody coped with the miserable conditions around them. The information provided by the excavation and subsequent analysis of Blocks 160 and 161, combined with detailed documentary research, will hopefully enable us to understand the lives of those who lived and died making New York the great metropolis that it is.



Project Area Location, USGS 7.5 Minute Series, Jersey City, NJ-NY Quadrangle, Photorevised 1981





The following quote is from the memorial of the American Equal Rights Association of the Congress of the United States:

We believe that humanity is one in all, those intellectual, moral and spiritual attributes, out of which grow human responsibilities. The scripture declaration is, 'So God created man in his own image; male and female created he them.'

And all divine legislation throughout the realm of nature recognizes the perfect equality of the two conditions.

Neither color nor sex is ever discharged from obedience to law, natural or moral; written or unwritten. . . . And hence we believe that all human legislation which is at variance with the divine code, is essentially unrighteous and unjust.

For further reading on Frederick Douglass:

Narrative of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave

Frederick Douglass on Women's Rights  
by Philip Foner

## VOICES FROM OLD NEW YORK: Frederick Douglass

Abolitionist, runaway slave and advocate for women's rights, Frederick Douglass, the great orator was indeed the voice of the African in America during the nineteenth century.

The North Star, one of America's earliest black news publications, voiced the concerns of citizens of color, as well as Douglass's commitment to civil and women's rights beginning in 1848. The anti-slavery paper was published in Rochester, New York. Most of the monies used to publish this paper was raised and furnished by white women who were members of the Rochester based Female Anti-Slavery Society.

Douglass's tremendous achievements and contributions as an advocate for the enslaved and formerly enslaved is well documented. Douglass worked in conjunction with many of the prominent and distinguished individuals of his time to achieve civil and human rights for all in an era in which the enslavement of Africans and the degradation of women was not the exception, but the rule.